



## GARDEN NOTES

# WATER IS TIGHT BUT MOST PLANTS ARE ALRIGHT

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Unless we get rain of Ark-building proportions we are going to feel the effects of the last two years of drought for some time to come. With the need to conserve water, homeowners have been asked to reduce or even eliminate outside watering this fall.

“Many homeowners live in fear that their landscape plants are just looking for any excuse to die,” says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. “In reality, most plants actually want to survive. With this in mind, they have developed defense mechanisms to insure their survival through water rationing. As a result, most homeowners are more nervous and concerned about the situation than their plants.”

One of the best defense mechanisms our plants resort to is simply going dormant, Goodspeed explains. This means they rest instead of making the extra effort to grow. In dry years, trees, shrubs, perennials and grass simply go dormant a little early.

If you have been watering your plants deeply and infrequently, many of them won't even notice if you turn the water off now, he says. Their deep roots will simply go down to find the water located lower in the soil. Plants that have been watered too frequently and have shallow roots may struggle a bit, but most will survive.

Most lawn grass is already drought tolerant, which means it is quite capable of handling dry weather, Goodspeed says. When the lawn's water supply is cut off, it simply goes dormant, which means it shuts down most of its metabolic activities and begins to rest. Cool season grasses can do this in the middle of the summer if it gets too hot and water is limited.

Although a lawn may look like it is dying, in reality it is doing just fine, he says. As soon as it gets some moisture, it will green back up and look as good as ever. That is, unless, that moisture comes in the form of snow. In which case, your grass will wait until spring to look good again. Try to fertilize your grass just before the first snow storm, which usually arrives about the second week in November. This insures that it will green up and look good early next spring when it breaks dormancy.

Perennials also go dry and look like they are dying, but usually have just gone dormant,

he says. Once the top growth dies, it can be cut back. Although this activity is normally taken care of later in the fall, perennials don't mind being cleaned up a little earlier.

Most shrubs have deeper roots than perennials, Goodspeed explains. This helps them maintain their color and beauty until a good frost comes. This is especially true for deciduous shrubs which drop their leaves every fall. Some may lose their leaves even earlier, but they should come out of it just fine next spring.

Losing leaves early is another good plant mechanism for survival, he says. Once the leaves fall off, deciduous shrubs require little water for survival and can then get ready for winter. As an example, look at the shrubs and small trees in our canyons. They haven't had a good watering for several weeks (or even months), and many of them are dropping their leaves early. Next spring, however, they will be well rested and once again look good.

One type of shrub that needs some attention under these dry conditions is the evergreen, he says. Unlike deciduous shrubs, they maintain their needles year round so they require some water even when it starts getting cold. Give them a deep drink once a month or so to make sure they are prepared for winter. Evergreen trees, like evergreen shrubs, may need a little water throughout the fall and winter. If they get some good rain or deep snow, do not worry about giving them any extra water.

“Of course, our dry weather also causes annuals to die a little earlier than normal,” Goodspeed says. “This is okay with me. Removing dead annuals early gives me a little extra time to work the soil in the beds, and prepare them for next spring. Fall is a great time to improve the soil by adding some organic matter to flower beds and the garden.”

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